

Testimony by Barbara Slavin, Senior Fellow, United States Institute of Peace & Author of
"Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S.
and the Twisted Path to Confrontation"
Before

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Public Hearing on

"Advancing Religious Freedom and Related Human Rights in Iran:

Strategies for an Effective U.S. Policy"

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I want to thank the commission for asking me to testify about this very important topic. Because of the absence of diplomatic relations between our two countries since 1980, only a small number of American journalists and no American officials have recent on the ground experience in Iran. I have been fortunate to visit Iran six times since 1996 and have also closely followed U.S. policy toward Iran during this period.

Let me also add that I approach this subject from the perspective of having lived in two other countries that experienced violent revolutions and were, at one time, bitter adversaries of the United States. I was an exchange student in the Soviet Union in the early 1970s and worked as a journalist in China in the early 1980s. In both cases, a change in U.S. policy toward engagement and recognition led to an improvement in living standards and to some extent, personal freedoms in those countries. Iran's human rights record also improved somewhat during the late 1990s while a reformist president was in power and tensions between the United States and Iran eased.

Repression in Iran has intensified, however, as hardline elements returned to power in Tehran in 2004 and 2005. In my view, it is not coincidental that this shift followed President Bush's designation of Iran as a member of an "axis of evil" in 2002 and his rejection of an Iranian offer for comprehensive negotiations in 2003. These actions embarrassed the reformist government of President Mohammad Khatami, which had cooperated with the United States in Afghanistan in 2001 in hopes that that would lead to improved relations with Washington. While Iran's human rights record during the Khatami presidency was by no means spotless, the record under his successor has been far worse. Since Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad became president in 2005, and especially in the past year, executions have increased and so have arrests of students, women activists and labor organizers. Innocent Iranian-Americans, including my good friend and mentor, Haleh Esfandiari of the Woodrow Wilson Center, have been thrown in prison on bogus charges of promoting a so-called velvet revolution in Iran.

The U.S. decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and the administration's highly ideological democracy promotion campaign have also contributed to the Iranian crackdown on dissent. President Bush frequently expresses concern about ordinary Iranians. But his overtures to "the Iranian people," when combined with a refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Iranian government, pre-emptive military action against Iraq and threats of such action against Iran, have convinced Tehran that the Bush administration seeks the violent overthrow of the Iranian regime. Such comments as Bush's pledge, during his 2005 second Inaugural address to "stand with" Iranians as they stand for their own liberty, and his decision to spend several hundred million dollars on democracy programs have backfired. They have given the Iranian government pretexts to clamp down on civil society and made it difficult for Iranians to accept U.S. government funds. U.S. rhetoric threatening to attack Iran because of its nuclear program has also hurt civil society in Iran. In a climate in which an American president talks of "World War III" if Iran acquires nuclear weapons knowhow, Iranians who criticize their leadership are vulnerable to charges of treason.

At this late date in the Bush presidency, it is difficult to see a way in which this administration might positively impact the human rights climate in Iran. A new U.S. administration, however, will have an opportunity for a more creative approach.

The next U.S. president should certainly continue to affirm support for democracy and human rights, but express confidence in the ability of Iranians to reform their government on their own. The noted Iranian dissident Akbar Ganji has said repeatedly that the most helpful thing the U.S. government and U.S. human rights groups can do is to publicize rights abuses in Iran but stop threatening to change the regime by force. As a first step, the next administration could reaffirm the 1981 Algiers accords which ended the 1979-81 hostage crisis. Under this agreement, the United States promised not to interfere in the internal affairs of Iran. Instead of allocating money explicitly for democracy promotion, the next U.S. administration could spend more on scholarships for Iranians to study here and for Americans to study in Iran.

It would also be helpful to lift blanket Treasury Department restrictions on American nongovernmental organizations that seek to do humanitarian work in Iran and which do not espouse an obvious political agenda.

To support increased contacts between the two countries and give U.S. officials a better understanding of the impact of their policies, it would be extremely helpful to have U.S. diplomats in Iran to process visas for Iranians seeking to travel here. At present, Iranians must travel twice to Dubai or Turkey -- first to apply for a visa and then to obtain one -- before they can come to the United States. This is expensive and cumbersome and opens Iranians to additional scrutiny by Iran's security services. In an interview two years ago, President Ahmadinejad told me that he would consider allowing U.S. consular officials in Iran if the United States accepted direct flights between New York and Tehran. This was something that Ahmadinejad proposed in early 2006. However, the Bush administration never replied.

U.S. officials could also acknowledge that American actions in the prosecution of the war on terror have undermined the U.S. ability to promote human rights abroad. When I interviewed former Iranian President Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in 2005, he said that because of U.S.

human rights abuses at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, the United States had "lost the moral platform" from which to judge others. In a recent op ed in the British newspaper, the Guardian, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki made a similar remark. Mottaki also criticized the United States for rejecting the outcome of democratic elections in Algeria in the early 1990s and more recently, in Palestine.

Iran, with all its faults, is more pluralistic and less oppressive than many U.S. allies in the region, including Saudi Arabia. Iran is entering an election cycle that may produce leaders who are more pragmatic and less repressive. At a minimum, U.S. officials should refrain from rhetoric and actions that could intensify a climate of hostility and fear in Iran. Like China and the Soviet Union, Iran will inevitably change. Its revolutionary character has already faded considerably over the past three decades. Its population is overwhelmingly young, literate and aware of the outside world. Iranians need encouragement from established democracies, not lectures.

That encouragement will be most effective if it comes from a country that has shown an ability to recognize its own mistakes and correct its record on human rights. The United States has always led best when it has led by example. Thank you very much.